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Testimony of Natasha M. Pierre, Esq., State Victim Advocate  
Submitted to the Judiciary Committee  
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Good morning Senator Coleman, Representative Tong and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. For the record, my name is Natasha Pierre and I am the Victim Advocate for the State of Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony concerning:

Raised Senate Bill No. 471, An Act Concerning Access to Justice

When an applicant applies for a restraining order, the applicant must demonstrate to the court a continuous threat of present physical pain or physical injury, stalking or a pattern of threatening by a family or household member. Likewise, an applicant for a civil protection order must demonstrate that the applicant is a victim of sexual abuse, sexual assault or stalking by a named respondent, other than a family or household member.

In both scenarios, it takes tremendous strength and courage for the applicant to simply walk into a courthouse and request protection. Often the applicant may be in turmoil and intimidated by the court process. Raised Senate Bill No. 471 will require the Chief Court Administrator to establish a voluntary attorney program, which will procure the services of attorneys to provide representation to program participants at no cost. Such legal representation will include assistance in applying for a restraining order or civil protection order.

The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) fully supports the proposal as it will ensure that applicants are provided the benefit of legal counsel with knowledge of the court process, any statutory requirements and useful mechanisms for preparation of successful hearing, such as witnesses, evidence and testimony. The court will be in a much better position to determine the outcome of an application when the applicant is adequately prepared for the hearing with the assistance of legal counsel.

Thank you for consideration of my testimony. I strongly urge the Committee's favorable report of Raised Senate Bill No. 471.